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ENGLAND'S FOOD SUPPLY IN TIME OF WAR.

BY H. SETON-KARR, M. P.

ON April 6, 1897, the following resolution, on the motion of the writer, seconded by Mr. R. Yerburgh, Conservative member for Chester, was, in a fairly well-attended House, accepted by the government, and unanimously adopted by the British House of Commons, viz.:

"That, in the opinion of this House, the dependence of the United Kingdom on foreign imports for the necessaries of life, and the consequences that might arise therefrom in the event of war, demand the serious attention of Her Majesty's government."

The grounds of its acceptance by the government were simply stated by Mr. Balfour. He said: "In the final resort, of course, our security rests upon the navy, and the navy alone, and if we have a navy adequate to protect our coasts, though the price of bread might rise to an alarming extent, and there might be difficulties and embarrassments, and the pinch of want might be felt, we need have no fear that we shall be starved into submission by continental nations. . . . I, both on my own behalf, and on behalf of the government, frankly accept the responsibility which the resolution throws upon us, and I heartily accept also the proposition that the strength of our navy shall be equal to the defence of our commerce as well as of our shores."

While the mover and supporters of the resolution were satisfied, for the time being at all events, to have it accepted by the House and the government, the above-quoted grounds for this acceptance did not altogether represent their views. An invincible navy is no doubt a necessity for the welfare and safety of Great Britain and its Empire. But an invincible navy is not, in the opinion of many, an altogether sufficient safeguard against all the possible risks of war. The wise commander of a fortress not only arms, but also provisions, his garrison; otherwise his arms

and ammunition may possibly be useless. "There are three handmaidens," said King Henry V. of England, when he sat down before the city of Rouen to starve it into submission, "that attend upon War—Fire, Sword, and Famine—and I have chosen the meekest of the three ;" and, he might have added, not the least persuasive.

It cannot therefore be assumed, as a matter of course, that England's food supply in time of war is a question for the navy alone. If this assumption were admitted this article would not be written. I propose shortly to deal with this question as one involving other considerations besides and in addition to the command of the sea, a point of view not altogether ignored by Mr. Balfour when he said (as quoted above) that "the price of bread might rise to an alarming extent."

As a preliminary point, I note that the terms of the resolution were criticised in the debate, and also subsequently in the press, as vague and general, and as containing no specific provision against the possible dangers in view. In answer to this it may be pointed out that the resolution was intentionally framed in general terms, as the main point was to obtain a government inquiry. The various remedies suggested traverse a wide field, and were in some cases of an alternative character. They could not all, by any possibility, be comprised in the terms of one resolution. To have inserted one—say protection, for example, or state granaries, both of which have their advocates—would only have resulted in alienating the support of many who nevertheless appreciated the dangers indicated in the general terms of the resolution, and were in favor of a government inquiry, by which means alone the real nature and effect, and the rival claims of the various possible and alternative remedies, can properly and adequately be ascertained and adjusted.

The facts of the case on which the resolution is founded are not a matter of controversy. The dependence of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland on foreign imports for the necessities of life is now a well-known and established fact. In addition to five-sixths of our breadstuffs (wheat and flour), we import such articles as butter, eggs, cheese, meat, fruit, sugar, vegetables, milk, lard, as well as oats and barley, in large and increasing quantities every year, the money value of our yearly imports of food being now put at £150,000,000.

For the sake of simplicity I propose to deal solely with the imports of breadstuffs; although, so far as the other articles mentioned are concerned, the difference is one of degree only, and not of principle. But bread is the prime necessity of life, particularly for the wage-earning millions in the great industrial centres of the United Kingdom. It is the one article of food which they desire and expect to buy in reliable and sufficient quantity, and for which they are not prepared to pay a fluctuating or enhanced price. For the purposes of my argument, therefore, the figures of these imports will suffice.

The annual national consumption of wheat and flour in the United Kingdom now amounts to over 28,000,000 quarters of 480 pounds. This is obviously a steadily increasing figure along with the increase of our population. Of this amount about 19,000,000 quarters are imported from foreign countries, chiefly from the United States, Russia, and the Argentine Republic. This also appears to be, in the aggregate, an increasing quantity, though the relative amount imported from the different countries may vary a little from year to year. From British possessions—India, Australasia, and Canada—some 3,000,000 to 4,000,000 quarters are imported. This appears to be at present a somewhat decreasing quantity. The balance of our annual consumption, about 5,000,000 quarters, is produced at home, not taking into account about 2,000,000 quarters used for seed and farm purposes. This home production, needless to say, has been for the last fifty years a steadily decreasing quantity.

The net result is that five out of every six of the population of the British Isles (and some say this is understating the case) are fed on imported breadstuffs, and four out of these five, or two-thirds of the whole, are fed on imports exclusively foreign. Moreover, as things now are, these proportions will inevitably grow larger every year. As regards our reserve of breadstuffs, it is naturally difficult to ascertain the exact amount at any one time in the hands of the various millers and merchants throughout the country. But it may safely be stated that this reserve never exceeds three months' supply, and frequently sinks as low as one month's supply or less. On January 1, 1897, the amount of maize, wheat, and flour on British premises, as given in the published statistics, was only 2,133,000 quarters, or less than three weeks' supply. It is obvious that in the event of a declara-

tion of war a monopoly for the time being would practically be created in breadstuffs, with so small a supply of this necessary of life held in private hands, and a rise in price would inevitably follow.

So much, then, for the bare facts of the case as they now stand with regard to England's yearly national supply of wheat and flour, and the sources from which it is derived. Let us take a glance at the situation from what I may term a comparative and historical point of view. The present dependence of the United Kingdom on foreign countries for its daily bread is unexampled and unprecedented in the history of the world. All the other Great Powers are practically self-supporting within their own borders. France is self-maintained. In the Franco-Prussian war she was never in fear of famine or starvation, except in beleagured towns, and then only from want of commissariat organization and foresight. Germany, Austria, and Italy, the countries forming the Triple Alliance, produce about three-quarters of their national requirements of the necessities of life in time of peace, and in time of war could no doubt support themselves if necessary. Even Germany, the least productive country relatively to her population of the three, has during the ten years from 1883 to 1893, and notwithstanding her great recent growth in industrial prosperity, increased her wheat area by 300,000 acres. Russia and the United States are not only self-supporting, but are the two greatest grain-exporting countries in the world. England alone, with the widest Empire, and the largest industrial population—relatively to her area—of them all, is the solitary exception, and lives from hand to mouth. Her food supplies are chiefly sea-borne, over ocean routes thousands of miles in length; and two-thirds of her yearly national consumption of breadstuffs come from countries over whose internal policy she has no control, and against whose commercial and fiscal policy she has, by her adoption of Free Trade, deliberately deprived herself of all means of retaliation. The position may or may not be sound, but it is certainly absolutely unique, not only as compared with other countries, but also in her own history. In 1812, when England was at war with both France and America, and when her population was less than half what it is now, she was self-supporting, and imported no wheat or flour. Yet it is a remarkable fact, to be noted in passing, that the price of the quartern loaf at that time rose to one shilling

and eightpence, and bread riots occurred in many of our large towns. This high price of bread was obviously not caused by war-risk to ocean commerce, but probably arose from the operations of the press-gang interfering with agriculture. The occurrence, however, is a significant illustration of the sensitiveness of the price of bread under adverse circumstances. In 1840, according to "*Porter's Progress of the Nation*," the population of Great Britain was 17,500,000, of whom 16,500,000 were fed on home-grown wheat; Ireland at that time being entirely self-supporting. In 1843, Cobden himself estimated that of our yearly national consumption of 21,000,000 quarters of wheat, we only imported 1,000,000 quarters, producing 20,000,000 quarters at home. With 15,000,000 less population to feed than now, the United Kingdom at that time—fifty years ago—had over double the wheat area it now possesses, and produced at home more than nineteen-twentieths of its national requirements. It is perfectly certain that England's present dependence on foreign food supplies not only did not exist at that time, but that it was never even contemplated as a possible contingency by Cobden and his disciples. Nothing in this connection is more remarkable than Cobden's own arguments on this point. For example, in a speech in 1844 he said :

"These philosophical men, so profoundly ignorant of what is immediately around them, will tell us that Free Trade will throw their land out of cultivation. I predict with Lord Ducie and others that, so far from throwing land out of use, Free Trade in corn is the very way to increase the production at home, and stimulate the cultivation of the poorer soils by compelling the application of more capital and labor to them. We do not (in consequence of Free Trade in corn) anticipate having one quarter less corn from the soil of this country."

This argument Cobden constantly reiterated on many occasions and in every possible form. It has been completely and even ridiculously falsified by the result. England's wheat area at that time was over 4,000,000 acres. It is now under 2,000,000 acres, and is steadily decreasing in inverse ratio to the growth of her population. Whatever else Cobden may have been, it is clear that as a prophet he was an absolute failure. In fact, were he alive now, he would be logically bound by his own arguments, and in view of the total failure of his prophecies, to advocate the reimposition of the corn duties as strenuously as fifty years ago he advocated their abolition.

Since Cobden's successful crusade against the corn laws, and coincidently with the increase of wheat cultivation in Russia, in the great virgin wheat belt of Western North America, and in silver-using countries, such as India and the Argentine Republic, whence the development of steam power and rapid ocean transit, undreamt of by our forefathers, enables foreign produce to undersell the British farmer in his own market town, England's wheat area has gradually but steadily decreased, and foreign imports have as steadily increased along with her population, until the present position of dependence has been arrived at. It must also be noted that since 1853 England has been engaged in no European war by which the situation could be tested. But it is a significant fact that even the Crimean War, which was in no sense a naval war, and in which our naval commerce was never even threatened, had the effect of sending up wheat from fifty-five shillings to seventy-five shillings per quarter, and the price of the quartern loaf then rose in London to one shilling and fourpence.

Finally, and to complete this brief historical survey, England's naval supremacy against any possible combination is not at present, at all events on paper, the absolute mathematical certainty it once was. During the past ten years what may be described as an era of acute naval rivalry has commenced for unhappy Europe, already groaning under the burden of great land armaments. The following is an extract from an article by the naval correspondent of the *Daily Graphic* of April 15, 1897, under the heading of "The Command of the Sea":

"The terrible power of fleets has been only too clearly grasped by the nations of the Continent, who are anxious to avail themselves of this arm, whether for use against each other or against England, with whom they have so many causes of quarrel. In the past ten years Russia has constructed a new and powerful fleet; Germany has developed a small, but admirable navy, while England has made extraordinary efforts. And now France meditates a great increase of her navy, professing alarm lest she should be distanced by her own rival and by Germany. The naval party in France are turning their eyes to a colonial policy, and to carry out such a policy must be able to speak with England in her gates. When they point to the vast progress which the British navy has made in the last decade—its steady expansion, its 200 odd new ships, its increase in men—they hurriedly pass over the fact that, with all this advance, she is not by any means certain of commanding the sea against the Dual Alliance (France and Russia), and that without the command of the sea England becomes an isolated fortress, liable to be starved into surrender. . . . A power which has no ally, and

which is vulnerable, to quote M. "La Poulaine" in fully five times as many points as France. . . . The young school in France, which advocates the bombardment of open towns, the attack upon our commerce, and the abandonment of the armored battleship, is just now particularly active. It wishes to see a large number of very fast cruisers, steaming twenty-five knots or more, constructed for the express purpose of commerce destruction. . . . The vulnerability of British commerce (its mercantile marine is worth, at the lowest figure, £130,000,000) has profoundly impressed Frenchmen."

The article contains a good deal more to the same effect, including the following :

"Said M. de Kerjégu, the reporter on the French Estimates: 'The cause of England's greatness will be a cause of weakness to her in war. Her daily life, her essential interests, are subordinated to the arrival and departure of her merchant shipping. . . . At the simple menace of a conflict with a great maritime Power the rates of insurance would rise to enormous figures.' The fact that we (England) import £150,000,000 worth of food annually, besides raw material, which is the food of our manufactories, is also noted by him."

From a strictly naval point of view this article appears to pile up the agony a little too high ; and also seems to ignore the "personal equation" point of view, as well as the fact that England can build, and even man, a second fleet, if the necessity arises, more quickly by far than any of her rivals. But, with this discount, the criticism is powerful enough.

Under all these circumstances, then, the question an Englishman naturally asks himself is this : Do the lessons of history in any way justify the belief that any country can afford to depend so largely on foreigners for the necessities of life, having in view the risk of war with one or more maritime powers, least of all a densely populated island empire like our own ?

In spite of the boasted civilization of this nineteenth century, war is a contingency that must be reckoned with, and the Universal Peace Society can only at present be regarded as a "nebular hypothesis." So far as Europe is concerned, every one who reads the daily papers must admit that a European war in the near future is not an impossible event. Greece and Turkey are fighting at the present moment, and how or when this war will end, and whether or no other European countries will ultimately be drawn into the strife, no man can at present say. Outside the European arena the possibilities of war are not perhaps so great.

In this connection I desire shortly to consider the relations

of England and the United States. The Anglo-American arbitration treaty, an outcome of wise statesmanship on both sides of the Atlantic, has not yet passed the American Senate. Whether or not it will do so sooner or later, the feeling of which that treaty is the outward and visible sign has a real and widespread existence.

The possibility of war between England and America, the two great English-speaking, civilized, and civilizing powers of the world, is certainly regarded on this side of the Atlantic, and probably on both, as infinitely remote. During the height of the so-called Venezuelan crisis, a little more than a year ago, nothing was more remarkable than the calm and pacific tone in relation thereto shown by the English people and the English press, in sharp contrast to the belligerent attitude, to say nothing of the commission of a flying squadron, evoked by the now historic telegram of the German Emperor. All this is now ancient history. But the difference in feeling was clear and unmistakable. Every Englishman believes in the unfortunate possibility of an Anglo-European war. No Englishman believes in the real possibility of an Anglo-American war. The two countries are united by ties of blood, religion, and language. They have vast financial and commercial relations. They would, in the event of war—whatever its result—inflict on one another incalculable damage and loss. They have no conflicting interests, territorial or otherwise—Canada not excepted—sufficient to justify such an international calamity. All these circumstances should combine to render such an event impossible. These considerations directly affect my argument. Half the exports from the United States to England are, in fact, breadstuffs, and of this commodity alone these exports supply more than one-third of our yearly national consumption. To deprive American wheat-producers and grain-shippers of their most valuable market would inflict material injury on American prosperity. Let us suppose that a combination of European powers against England declared food to be contraband of war. Such a declaration of international law has generally been opposed to American policy on general international grounds. For the special reasons mentioned above, and again to quote Mr. Balfour, “this theoretical prepossession would be stimulated by the strongest motives of personal interest.” At the same time it may be remarked that

Uncle Sam would hardly declare war in order to enforce this view except for his own hand.

The position therefore appears to be clear up to a certain point. The possibility of America prohibiting the export of breadstuffs, or joining in any European declaration that food is contraband of war, may be dismissed from our minds. Yet the war risk for ocean commerce will still remain. A combination of European powers against England, bent on some national aggrandizement, would not stick at trifles. Our navy would be amply occupied in meeting hostile fleets, in blockading hostile ports, in guarding our shores, and in protecting as far as possible our inter-colonial commerce and our vast mercantile marine. We should have an immense coast line to protect—a vast extent of sea to patrol. With twenty-five-knot hostile cruisers bent on commerce destruction, what, we may well ask, would the rate of war insurance rise to for American and Argentine grain ships across three or four thousand miles of ocean? The Mediterranean trade route, in the event of a Franco-Russian combination, would practically be closed for commerce, and possibly St. George's Channel. The Atlantic route to the north of Ireland could probably be kept fairly well open. By some means, no doubt, our food supplies would be landed, but we should have to supply the protecting battleships and cruisers, and we should certainly be compelled to pay the war-risk price. What this price would be it is difficult to estimate. The extraordinary development of modern naval armaments has largely altered all previously existing conditions. But some small idea of the commercial risk involved, and the consequent rise of price, may be obtained from the experience of the American Civil War. No doubt this was an extreme case. The Southern States had no navy, although the "Alabama" succeeded, single-handed, in paralyzing American commerce, and practically driving, for the time being, the American trading flag off the seas. But, in spite of the "Alabama," Southern ports were in a condition of absolute blockade. No ordinary steamers ran. Rates of insurance, we are told, on blockade runners rose 900 per cent. Wages of seamen rose 300 per cent. The price of commodities rose in proportion. Salt, for example, bought at thirty shillings per ton, is said to have been sold, after a successful blockade run, at £340 per ton. Grain and meat, in this case, did not require

to be imported at all, being home-produced. What their prices might have run to under these conditions, if required to be imported, it is, perhaps, too startling to contemplate. No one, of course, supposes for a moment that with our present navy, England's coast line could be blockaded in such a manner. If such an event were possible, and when it happened, England's Empire and her greatness would be gone. But there are many degrees of comparison between a condition of absolute blockade and a condition of open ocean trade routes, while England in her network of ocean commerce, and with her bread-larder abroad, is beyond comparison more vulnerable now in this respect than any country ever previously known to history. One or two modern and unscrupulous 25-knot commerce-destroyers on the loose in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans might very seriously affect the domestic economy of millions of British homes, while Britannia and her navy remained for all general purposes the Mistress of the Seas.

The question of England's food supply in time of war appears to resolve itself then into one of price, however powerful her navy may be; and the price might run so high as to cause serious suffering, disturbance, and riot at home. It is here that we differ from the "invincible navy and nothing else" school. I am still insular enough to believe that the population of these islands is made of the same kind of stuff as its ancestors, and would, if the necessity arose, and in the last resort, worry through any reasonable, or, for the matter of that, unreasonable, amount of starvation and riot at home, as well as fighting abroad, even under the conditions I have endeavored to describe, rather than compromise ingloriously with its foes. But I am also convinced that the ordeal would be a severe one, severer perhaps than anything we have ever faced before, and if some practicable means can be found to minimize or insure against the risk of starvation involved, it would be well to ascertain and adopt them.

We are all familiar with the arguments of the economic school. The position, they tell us, is inevitable. Our country has nailed the colors of Free Trade to the mast. Nothing must be done to raise the price of the people's food, even by a hair's-breadth. We are bound to import from the cheapest markets, however much our wheat area at home may continue to diminish, and our agricultural industry to decay.

It is obvious that these arguments altogether ignore and leave out of the question the principle of reasonable national insurance against risk. On a declaration of war, we may be told, an adequate supply of wheat and flour can at once be purchased, and be made a matter of imperial expenditure, if necessary. This is somewhat on the principle of insuring one's house against fire after the fire has broken out. The price or rate of insurance, after the event, is generally prohibitive. Our point is that national provision should be made beforehand, when it can be done at a reasonable rate. England no doubt is rich, and the imperial purse is deep, and the shoulders of the individual consumer could in any event be partially relieved from the direct burden of a war-priced loaf. But the purchase of adequate food supplies made in the hurry and panic of a declaration of war would impose a severe tax on the community at large, and indirectly fall on the consumer in the end.

It is not my intention within the limits of this article to deal, except in the briefest manner, with the various remedies or means of national insurance against war-priced foods that have been suggested. It is sufficient here to remark that, in addition to an adequate navy, some insurance against war famine, some national reserve of wheat for example, sufficient to tide over any possible emergency, should in our opinion be provided beforehand. The natural place for such a reserve is in the land, the barns and stackyards of the United Kingdom, to be obtained only by some form of encouragement or protection that would ensure to the British farmer a remunerative price for his produce, and some safeguard against unfair foreign competition. There are many who believe that this result could be obtained by moderate protective duties, on a sliding scale, directed chiefly against depreciated-silver-using countries, without materially affecting the consumers' market. It may possibly still be true, it certainly used to be true, that a strong prejudice exists in the minds of England's laboring classes against any form of protection on food. But I am one of many who now believe that our system of Free Trade is no longer a principle to be blindly worshipped, but a question of expediency to be inquired into, and if necessary modified for some sufficient counterbalancing advantage. The idea is spreading and taking root, and will some day, I believe, bear practical fruit. A comparatively small rise in the price of wheat,

and one that could confidently be relied on by the British farmer, would in a year or two largely increase our wheat area ; and when it is remembered that about quadruple our present wheat-acreage, say 8,000,000 acres, or about one-sixth of the whole cultivable area of the kingdom, would supply us with all the bread we need, this solution of the difficulty does not appear altogether impossible.

Another step in the right direction, from England's point of view at all events, is the growing feeling in favor of colonial commercial federation that now exists. The well-known resolution of the Ottawa conference of 1894 in favor of a preferential customs arrangement between England and her colonies, Mr. Chamberlain's speech in London of March 25, 1896, in favor of some such arrangement, in which our colonies must join, on the principle of the German Zollverein, and last, but not least, the new preferential tariff bill, recently introduced by the Dominion government in the Ottawa House of Commons, under which preference will be given to British products, all mark a new era in our intercolonial history. This movement affects my present argument in this respect—that it must tend to the encouragement of colonial rather than foreign agricultural imports to this country, and so relieve our present large dependence on imports exclusively foreign. The latent capacity of India, Australasia, and particularly Canada, with some encouragement, to supply England with all the surplus agricultural produce she may require is undoubted. It is an additional favorable factor in the case that our communication with Canada is along the shortest and the most easily protected ocean trade route to our shores.

Rudyard Kipling's recent verses on the new Canadian tariff bill may well be quoted here :

“ A nation spoke to a nation—
A throne sent word to a throne :
' Daughter am I in my mother's house,
But mistress in my own !
The gates are mine to open,
As the gates are mine to close,
And I abide by my mother's house,'
Said our Lady of the Snows.”

The last suggested remedy I will briefly mention is a reserve of wheat in national granaries at home. The idea, no doubt, is a new one to the generality of Englishmen, who may never have

seen an American grain elevator, even in a dream, and whose idea of storage is sacks in a barn. It is an alternative remedy until we arrive at the happy condition of growing our wheat at home, and no doubt possesses some drawbacks, more apparent, I think, than real, to the inexperienced mind. It is stated, for instance, that the wheat would not keep, that the experiment would be too costly, and that it would be too great an interference with legitimate trade. To all these objections there are, to my mind, sufficient answers, which it is, perhaps, unnecessary to recapitulate here. These questions form appropriate subject matter for the government inquiry which we desire, and which, in the end, I venture to think we shall obtain. We live, like our cousins across the Atlantic, in a time of popular institutions and representative government. Our great industrial constituencies have long since determined in their own interests that England shall possess an adequate navy to guard her shores and preserve her markets. For the same reasons we may anticipate that sooner or later these constituencies will also insist on some additional and reasonable security being provided against famine-priced food in time of war.

H. SETON-KARR.